

The District Has a New Language Access Law

On Wednesday, April 21, Mayor Anthony A. Williams signed into law the Language Access Act (LAA). The central purpose of the LAA is to provide greater access and participation in public services, programs and activities for residents of the District of Columbia who have limited or no English proficiency.

The Act requires that DC governmental departments, programs, and services assess the need for and offer oral language services, and provide written translations of what are defined as “vital documents. In addition, District agencies that have major public contact must establish and implement a Language Access Plan and designate a Language Access Coordinator.

Moreover, the new law mandates that the Office of Human Rights, in conjunction with the Office on Latino Affairs and the Office of Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs, assist, coordinate, and supervise DC government agencies, programs, and services in complying with the LAA.

Representatives from the city's diverse immigrant community along with the directors of the Office on Latino Affairs, Gustavo Velasquez, the Office of Pacific Asian Islander Affairs, Greg Chen, and Office of Human Rights, Kenneth Saunders joined Mayor Williams at a signing ceremony that took place at the Wilson Building.

As Mayor Williams explained during the signing event, “Language access is a civil rights issue, and it's also a customer service issue. This legislation will allow local immigrant residents have access to District government services and benefits they need and are entitled to. I'm glad that DC is a national leader in providing fair treatment of our immigrant communities.”

The Act expressly sites that it applies on its effective date to:

- (1) Department of Health;
- (2) Department of Human Services;
- (3) Department of Employment Services;
- (4) Metropolitan Police Department;
- (5) DC Public Schools;
- (6) Office of Planning;
- (7) Fire and Emergency Medical Services; and
- (8) Office of Human Rights.

The LAA shall also apply as of October 1, 2004, to:

- (9) Department of Housing and Community Development
- (10) Department of mental Health;
- (11) Department of Motor Vehicles;
- (12) Child and Family Services Agency;
- (13) Alcohol Beverage Regulatory Administration; and
- (14) Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs.

The Language Access Act shall accordingly apply as of October 1, 2005, to:

- (15) Department of Parks and Recreation;
- (16) Office of Aging;

- (17) DC Public Library;
- (18) Office of Personnel;
- (19) Office of Contracting and Procurement;
- (20) Department of Corrections;
- (21) Department of Public Works; and
- (22) Office of Tax and Revenue.

Additionally, the Act shall apply as of October 1, 2006 to all DC government agencies or “covered entities,” including DC Courts. However, the LAA excludes the Advisory Neighborhood Commissions.

Washington, DC, is the third city after Oakland and San Francisco to enact similar legislation.

The DC Council passed the Language Access Act, introduced by Councilmember Jim Graham, on April 6.